Introduction

What time is it on the clock of the world? What is humanity called to do at this moment in history?

Detroit's preeminent philosopher-activist Grace Lee Boggs is known for placing these profound questions at the forefront of every conversation. A veteran of the struggles for civil rights, black power, and social transformation, she sent a stern warning to the nation not long after her 98th birthday.

"With growing unemployment, the crisis in the Mideast, and the decline in this country's global dominance," Boggs declared, "we have come to the end of the American Dream. The situation reminds me of the 1930s when good Germans, demoralized by their defeat in World War I, unemployment and inflation, followed Hitler into the Holocaust."

"These days, in our country," she continued, "a growing number of white people feel that, as they are becoming the minority and a black man has been elected president, the country is no longer theirs. They are becoming increasingly desperate and dangerous."[1]

Her foreboding commentary was a pitch-perfect answer to Donald Trump's openly racist, misogynistic, and xenophobic appeals to "make America great again." Fed up with the "establishment," disgruntled, anxious voters in Michigan and the battleground Rust Belt states delivered Trump's decisive breakthrough. However, the event that prompted Boggs occurred well before 2016.

In 2013, the state's governor, Rick Snyder, stripped Detroit's elected government of its authority and named an emergency manager to take autocratic control over the entire city. The key elements that would later mark Trump's election facilitated the state takeover and bankruptcy of Detroit: authoritarian rule by the superwealthy; a "whitelash" against black political power; voter disenfranchisement; the gutting of workers' rights; and the pillaging of public goods and institutions.

The architects of this heavy-handed maneuver have put forward Detroit's corporate makeover as a precedent for financially distressed governments and public entities across the globe. From arts to zoos and from parks to pensions, every public asset, service, job, benefit, and regulation was put on the chopping block to be downsized, dismantled, or liquidated. Rampant home evictions, water shutoffs, school closures, and militarized policing disrupted life for thousands but became commonsense measures for ruling elites. Businesses were paid handsomely to plan, run, and redevelop the city. Detroit is the signature site where this antisocial gospel began normalizing ideas and practices that are pushing us toward a system of authoritarian plutocracy.

The sad reality is that the hazards millions of Americans fear in early 2017 most likely have already struck Detroit. The Great Recession that began for most of the nation in 2008 has been a multigenerational calamity for southeast Michigan. Once considered the wealthiest city in America, Detroit now has an offi-

cial 40 percent poverty rate that is triple the national average. During the 1950s, Detroit's population peaked near 2 million. By 2015, it was estimated to be down to 677,116. According to the U.S. Census, the city is roughly 83 percent "black or African American," 8 percent "white," 7 percent "Hispanic or Latino," 1 percent "Asian," and less than 1 percent "American Indian and Alaska Native."[2]

These are symptoms of a systemic crisis. No city has come to embody the decline of middle-class economic security, the entrenchment of structural unemployment, and the burden of long-term debt more than Detroit. No region has come to embody racial divisions and the collapse of the political center more than metropolitan Detroit. To borrow from critical race theorists Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, Detroit is America's canary in the coal mine. Too often it has been cast off as a space of exception—its problems so insurmountable that the nation refused to deal with them. However, Guinier and Torres call on us to recognize how embattled communities of color "signal problems with the way we have structured power and privilege" and "provide the early warning signs of poison in the social atmosphere."[3]

Speaking as a movement elder, Grace Lee Boggs was well positioned to sound that alarm. The daughter of Chinese immigrants, Boggs drew her wisdom from a lifetime of activism that began during the Great Depression amid financial distress, racial-ethnic scapegoating, and the existential threat of fascism. She had fought many of those same pernicious elements during six decades of organizing in Detroit, including 40 years partnering with James Boggs, her late husband and a black autoworker from Alabama.

The Boggses stood at the center of the movement in Motown. They saw union organizing integrate the shop floor and raise

the standard of living for workers nationwide. They marched with Martin Luther King Jr., who first gave his "I Have a Dream" speech among tens of thousands of Detroiters of all races two months before the 1963 March on Washington. They watched African Americans become a new majority in the city and elect Detroit's first black mayor. Unquestionably, the most dramatic, impactful, and divisive event of this period was the 1967 Detroit Rebellion.

White fears, however, mirrored black hopes. With each new precedent and democratic advance, there arose negative forces acting to repel the prospects for transformative social change and restore old hierarchies. The Boggses called this reactionary movement the "counter-revolution." Detroit was targeted for disinvestment and political repression because it was a center of power for labor and civil rights. The toxic stew of economic dislocation and racial resentment made the region a breeding ground for all varieties of populism.

Grace Lee Boggs traced the origins of the counter-revolution to the aftermath of World War II. As African Americans migrated to Detroit and insisted they be treated as equals, white residents fled to the suburbs to preserve racial segregation and discriminatory control over local governance. "Taking with them their schools, their businesses and their taxes," Boggs commented, "they impoverished the cities and attracted the attention and money of extreme right-wingers like the Koch brothers."[4]

Detroiters have already borne the brunt of one-party rule over Michigan. With the Tea Party wave election of 2010, Republicans seized control of all three branches of state government. Governor Snyder had run for office as a political outsider drawing on his personal wealth and promising to use a businessman's

acumen to shake up Lansing. Although self-identifying as a moderate, he presided over a dramatic shift to the right. Bipartisanship went out the door as the GOP gutted civil rights advances, passed antiunion laws, and hand delivered billions of dollars in subsidies and tax cuts to corporations. Because Republican leaders have recognized how unpopular some of these measures are, they have moved to preserve political power through gerrymandering and voter suppression.

With the right-wing U.S. turn coming on the heels of Brexit and an international surge in ultraconservative nationalism, a fateful through line connects the local, the national, and the global. The "post-racial" illusion has been shattered by a revival of white supremacy, unmitigated police killings, and the persistence of mass incarceration. As we teeter on the edge of ecological catastrophe and mass extinction, "free trade" has produced new extremes of wealth and poverty at the scale of city, nation, and world. Millennials and post-millennials fear they will be worse off than their parents, and the promise of never-ending progress and perpetual American superiority has evaporated.

A bevy of voices has sought to make sense of this indelibly fraught moment in history in which would-be signs of social progress—technological advancement, economic growth, and increased diversity—are producing new levels of economic and political polarization. Trump's election has drawn particular attention to books focused on white, rural, and working-class alienation and resentment ranging from the Deep South to the Upper Midwest. In notable cases, predominantly white communities have been ravaged by toxic environmental exposure and economic dislocation. Nevertheless, many voters in these areas harbor a libertarian repudiation of progressive proposals for state intervention

and see people of color and immigrants, who are themselves experiencing adverse conditions, as threats and competitors. They frequently maintain a disdain for so-called secular liberal elites alongside the perception that urban nonwhite, immigrant, and queer populations are getting ahead of them through unfair advantages and government aid.[5]

These notable insights must be complemented by more investigations into the political terrain of urban America and communities of color.[6] New policies dubiously advanced under the banner of "populism" threaten to bring more pain to the multiracial working class. At the same time, activist forces—from the antiglobalization Battle of Seattle protest against the World Trade Organization in 1999 to Occupy Wall Street in 2011 and, especially, the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement—have been building momentum on the left. Challenging the complicity of Democrats with corporate rule, Bernie Sanders's upset win in the 2016 Michigan primary was a product and renewed catalyst of this momentum.

As millions of Americans fret over the next stage of polarization, I assert that paradigmatic developments in Detroit have both epitomized and shaped national trends. While I do not claim that the complex and multifaceted problems we face evolved solely from Detroit, I believe a case study of the city is essential for understanding our current crisis and the prospects for moving beyond it. My account is based significantly on independent research and observation through a decade-and-a-half of living and working in Detroit, but it is also a work of synthesis that would not be possible without the journalistic, academic, and activist sources cited herein.

Readers should be mindful of three overarching arguments that guide this book:

The counter-revolution is a reaction to a 50-year rebellion.

The overlapping political and economic crises confronting us today are a product of the neoliberal turn.

Despite the immense hardships and disparagement its peoples have endured, Detroit remains most significant as a city of hope and possibility.

REBELLION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION

The definitive flash point for the rise of the counter-revolution was the Detroit Rebellion of 1967, which shook the nation to its core like no other. Detroit's uprising was part of a wave of urban disorders in which a predominantly young, black street force proclaimed its refusal to go along with a system that was too slow to accept racial equality and too quick to foreclose on the economic opportunities that had elevated tens of millions of whites into the middle class.

The rebellions of this tumultuous moment created a domestic crisis of governance and legitimacy that fused with international challenges to the U.S. empire from Vietnam and throughout the Third World. American leadership of the so-called Free World was rooted in the politics of liberalism as the centrist path between right-wing ideology, which accepted inequality as hereditary and fixed, and left-wing utopianism, which insisted that a revolutionary leap toward equality was desirable and achievable. Seeking to stabilize the industrial order, liberals acknowledged that capitalism was imperfect but appealed for mass support by promising incremental reform to build a future that was relatively more prosperous, inclusive, and egalitarian.

The crises of the late 1960s, however, provoked a polarized response, which we may see in hindsight as marking a point of

no return. For an all-too-brief moment, policy makers saw the urban rebellions as a clarion call to rapidly accelerate the pace of liberal reform and racial integration through social investments and progressive reform on an unprecedented scale. Black Power activists went further, demanding "community control" of urban neighborhoods and institutions as an expression of self-determination and liberation. Hastening the rise of a black majority, Detroit's rebellion was followed up by the 1973 election of the city's first African American mayor, Coleman A. Young, marking the beginning of four decades of black leadership in city hall. Comparable to the sentiment of Americans hailing Barack Obama's election in 2008, Detroiters felt a new sense of hope and promise.

Counter-revolutionary forces, however, upended the political will for progressive or radical social change. Insisting that the urban disturbances be called "riots," they demanded heavily militarized policing and repressive criminal justice measures to restore "law and order." In this regard, the 1967 rebellion never really ended, as unresolved contradictions fueled a half-century of low-intensity warfare. Rejecting structural interpretations of urban and racial inequality, conservatives framed the crisis as a problem of urban pathology that merged stereotypes based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. The perpetual fear of "riots" cast black masculinity as a threat to "public safety"—an old trope dating back to slavery that took on new meaning with the disappearance of urban jobs. Stereotypes used to rationalize harsh labor discipline were repurposed to justify militarized policing and mass incarceration. Moreover, representations of the "absent" black father and the black single mother as "welfare queen" were further deployed to justify white flight to the suburbs as a defense of "family values."

Such narratives of black failure were mashed together by those condemning black political control of Detroit. For all the feelings of pride and accomplishment he evoked from his African American constituents, Young became the ubiquitous scapegoat for white suburban opponents to blame for urban decay. Making matters worse, the scale of Detroit's mounting economic woes surpassed anything Young and the newly ascendant black political class were prepared for. Among major U.S. metropolitan regions, Detroit developed the most extreme case of racial segregation and wealth disparity between a city and its suburbs. Mayor Young's counterparts were white suburban politicians like Oakland County's L. Brooks Patterson, who championed sprawl and balanced-budget conservatism while vetoing most efforts at regional cooperation. Patterson has been among the most prominent of voices reinforcing the narrative that whites lost Detroit and blacks ruined the city.

The 50-year tug-of-war began with black Detroiters gaining "community control," which was not entirely illusory but primarily a concession that would prove limited in scope and duration. The other end of the rope has been pulled by white nostalgia for a city that never was. Taken together, the state takeover, bankruptcy, and gentrification of the city can be seen to comprise a counter-revolution to "make Detroit great again."

THE NEOLIBERAL TURN

The crises of governance, legitimacy, and the family associated with the late 1960s era of rebellion were interconnected in a crucial manner with a crisis of profitability, creating what geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore called "instability that characterized the end of the golden age of American capitalism."[7]

The response by capitalists to that crisis has been *neoliberalism*—an umbrella term for the concerted effort of corporate interests and conservative forces to push back the political challenge posed by the movements of the 1960s and reverse the expansion of social democratic policies and programs that defined the postwar era. While class stratification and inequality are inherent properties of the capitalist system driven by private ownership and profit, neoliberalism has intensified these polarizing tendencies by undoing measures designed to hold them somewhat in check. Through the implementation of "business-friendly" domestic laws and international "free trade" agreements, multinational capitalists have achieved a dramatic rise in their power and flexibility over the past five decades at the expense of the public commons and the rights and remuneration of workers. The political and economic tsunami that struck Detroit in the era of deindustrialization was built on the neoliberal structures of intensified exclusion and dispossession.

While the counter-revolution draws its energy from real and perceived economic anxiety, it scapegoats non-elite social actors for problems that are structural in nature. Twentieth-century Michigan, and more specifically Detroit, was once the birthplace of the American middle class. As the booming factories of the Big Three automakers (GM, Ford, and Chrysler) drew scores of migrants from the nation and the world, Detroit was simultaneously a marvel of advanced technology and the catalyst for the modern American labor movement. The fall of the U.S. industrial order began with automation over a half-century ago and was punctuated by the 2009 bankruptcies of GM and Chrysler. In its stead arose a polarized world of cutthroat global competition resulting in spectacular wealth for the few and rising debt, insecurity, and underemployment for the many. Although immi-

gration to Metro Detroit has been relatively low in comparison with other major metropolises, the sense that the region is on the losing end of globalization has fueled a nationalistic and xenophobic reaction that Trump's election dangerously stirred up again. As such, it is more critical than ever to understand the root causes of economic dislocation.

While the power of workers and unions has waned, new financial overlords have filled the vacuum. As business writer Rana Foroohar recently declared, "America's economic illness has a name: *financialization*. It's an academic term for the trend by which Wall Street and its methods have come to reign supreme in America, permeating not just the financial industry but also much of American business."[8] This perceptive insight must be extended to the public sector. Detroit's bankruptcy functioned as a hostile municipal takeover by financiers commissioned by the governor and emergency manager to reinvent Detroit on the basis of corporate restructuring principles. Their goal was to reinvest in revenue-generating sectors of the city by advancing gentrification, while ridding the balance sheet of the people and places deemed economic liabilities. What's more, the taxpayers were forced to compensate them at exorbitant hourly rates. This was an extreme version of the neoliberal restructuring taking place in cities, schools, hospitals, museums, and other formerly noncommercial entities nationwide.

Bolstering the ranks of billionaire cabinet members, Trump's selection of Michigan's Betsy DeVos for secretary of education signaled an intent to accelerate this trend at the federal level. The billionaire DeVos family has advanced a far-right agenda, spending millions to promote vouchers for parochial schools, for-profit charter schools, and policies that neutralize teachers' unions and public oversight. Drastic policy changes have sown

chaos in Detroit and exacerbated racial inequality under the guise of "school choice." DeVos is one of many who entered Trump's cabinet advancing an Orwellian logic: Destroying public schools is the key to saving public education.

A CITY OF HOPE AND POSSIBILITY

Notwithstanding the advance of the counter-revolution and the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, I want to make clear that the current political crisis—at the level of city, nation, and world—is a sign of polarized choices rather than triumph or conquest. The long battle to define and shape Detroit's "revitalization" provides a window into the epochal conflict between two alternative futures, one characterized by the shift toward authoritarian plutocracy and the other by the commitment to participatory democracy. That is what is at stake for all of us living and organizing in the 21st century.

Perhaps more importantly than anything else, Detroit has attracted national and international attention as a site where hope, creativity, and opportunity have emerged amid intense crisis and devastation. Grace Lee Boggs was inspired to see an unprecedented coalition of organizations and people from diverse ideological backgrounds coming together to resist and defeat the growing counter-revolution. She further believed that while it was not easy, it was possible to build a movement that would address racial and economic anxiety, while inviting and challenging those with counter-revolutionary tendencies "to join with us in creating a new American Dream."[9]

Twenty-first-century Detroit reveals the transformative potential of organizing that is grassroots in character but responds to the array of global and local forces conspiring against the city.

Activists understand that oppression occurs at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, geography, and ecology. Thus, they have worked to build intersectional movements that link together mobilization on multiple fronts and affirmations of difference across a multiplicity of identities. They see the forces of social change not as a unitary "mass" of bodies but more like a pluralistic collective of actors akin to what political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have called the "multitude."[10]

The collapse of the factory system and its correspondent social order has led some of Detroit's most visionary organizers to go beyond conventional notions of redistributing wealth to reimagining the meaning of work and wealth. They strive to build a new model of postindustrial society based on noncommercial forms of local ownership and production rooted in cooperation and mutuality. This is evident, for instance, in movements for freedom schools, collective housing, urban farming, and community safety. In this way they have not only resisted forces of oppression, but have also sought to redefine and remake the social relationships that sustain life and community in the face of abject disposability and a crisis of sustainability.

During my time in the city, Detroit came to represent the pertinent reminder of unfulfilled hopes and the idealistic promise of unfinished agendas in the Obama era. Now, as a darker, cynical mood has set on the nation and world, the struggles of Detroiters to survive under conditions of extreme adversity while creating mental and physical space to imagine radical alternatives may prove more illuminating than ever.